

11.7.14

Dear GALA workshop participants:

This paper is part of a new book-length project about *emergency claims*, or claims that particular situations are emergencies. Emergency claims are important because they significantly shape how resources, attention, and violence are allocated at the global level: throngs of reporters, millions of dollars, and even military interventions regularly follow on the heels of successful emergency claims. Emergency claims are used to expand the power of the already-powerful and justify suspending or overriding normal rules and procedures. They create a need for organizations, institutions, and social roles tasked with emergency response. They structure our perceptions of what counts as “normal,” and they lead us to expect a sharp boundary between what is normal and what is an emergency.

I call the broader dynamic in which many different actors make a wide range of emergency claims, and various audiences accept, reject, or ignore those claims, *emergency politics*. The main questions that I address in the larger project are: what are the implications of emergency politics for marginalized groups? If emergency politics is detrimental to marginalized groups, can we find or create plausible alternatives to it?

Marginalized people suffer disproportionately from (situations that are socially recognized as) emergencies, and so in a sense benefit from the entire perceptual and institutional apparatus of emergency claim-making. Yet I also think—this is the intuition motivating the entire project—that in several important respects, emergency politics is often quite bad for marginalized groups, on both democratic and justice-based grounds. One central aim of the project, then, is to closely examine emergency politics, and elucidate its advantages and disadvantages for marginalized groups—both groups that are socially recognized as victims of one or more emergencies, and groups that are not so recognized. The other central aim of the project is to locate or construct alternatives to emergency politics that retain, as much as possible, its action orientation, moral urgency, and sense of solidarity, while avoiding the injustices, exclusions, and biases associated with it.

The larger book project will draw extensively on case studies, both to explore how emergency politics functions and identify alternatives. I have not settled on specific cases yet (suggestions welcome!). However, I might look at the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the “obesity epidemic” in the United States together, in order to show how successful emergency claims function simultaneously as “weapons of the strong” and “weapons of the weak.” I might look at how technical tools for measuring famines in sub-Saharan Africa and approaches to identifying “failing schools” in the US are both regressive, in practice if not in theory, because they focus on negative divergences from the status quo ante in a given place. I might examine debates about mitigation and adaptation as responses to global climate change, or Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter From Birmingham Jail* and Mario Feit’s marvelous analysis of King’s “democratic impatience,” as examples of alternatives to emergency politics. Because I am interested in not only situations that are socially recognized as emergencies, but also failed and rejected emergency claims, some of my cases will be situations that are not socially recognized as emergencies. Likewise, because I am interested in not only discrete instances of successful and

failed emergency claims, but also larger patterns of these successes and failures, some of my “cases” will consist of such patterns, rather than discrete (successful or failed) emergency claims.

A more general aim of the larger project is to bring the very highly disparate literatures on emergencies into conversation with each other, especially (but not only) the literatures on the duty to rescue and emergency powers/states of exception. Because these two literatures, in particular, approach emergencies with such dramatically different presuppositions and draw on such different examples, they tend to pass each other in the night. The emergency claims approach helps us to see that this is the case and why it is a problem. It also offers a vocabulary for bringing these literatures into productive conversation both with each other, and with other literature on emergencies that defies these categories, such as work by Bonnie Honig and Elaine Scarry.

While the main audience for this book will be political theorists and philosophers interested in emergencies, I very much hope that it resonates with ordinary citizens who experience emergency politics on a day-to-day basis. Either in the book itself or associated papers, I also hope to develop arguments that are relevant to policy-makers and activists.

Thanks for reading the paper; I look forward to discussing it with you on the 20th!

Sincerely,
Jen